



Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica

ADDRESS TO THE NATION

BY

HONOURABLE ROOSEVELT SKERRIT

PRIME MINISTER OF

THE COMMONWEALTH OF DOMINICA

On the occasion of the

27th Anniversary of Independence

Sunday, November 3, 2005

“Moving Forward with Purpose and Mission”

Botanic Gardens, Roseau

Your Excellency Dr. Nicholas Liverpool,
President of the Commonwealth of Dominica and Mrs. Liverpool;
Your Ladyship Justice Claire Henry-Wasson;
Hon. Alix Boyd Knight,
Speaker of the House of Assembly;
Your Lordship Reverend Gabriel Malzaire,
Bishop of Roseau;
Your Excellencies, former Presidents of Dominica;
Cabinet Colleagues;
Former Prime Ministers of the Commonwealth of Dominica;
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps;
Other Members of the House of Assembly;
His Worship Cecil Joseph,
Mayor of Roseau;
Awardees;
Distinguished Invited Guests;
Members of the Media, Ladies and Gentlemen:

On the 3rd of November 1978, twenty-seven years ago, our beloved country achieved independence after nearly 400 years of conquest, slavery and colonialism. Despite systematic attempts to stifle the quest for freedom during centuries of oppression, the liberty torch continued to burn bright among the people and was passed from generation to generation. After World War II, as a new world order emerged, that beacon became part of a worldwide conflagration that lit the way to independence for nearly every colony. A Labour Government had the privilege of leading Dominica to Independence on that momentous day.

Fellow Dominicans and Friends, our purpose then was to represent and lead the people; and our mission was the complete political, economic and social enfranchisement of the people of

Dominica. My friends, today, after more than a quarter of a century, that purpose and that mission remain the same.

Every single Administration since Independence has come to power with a mandate to improve the conditions of the people of Dominica. Every one of them, regardless of political colour, has faced different challenges and has responded to them to the best of their ability. I wish at this juncture to thank all my predecessors, and to pay special tribute to Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, Prime Minister of Dominica from 1980-1995, who departed this life on September 6th 2005. She has left an indelible mark on the post independent development of this country. I also wish again to pay tribute to former Prime Ministers Pierre Charles and Rosie Douglas and former Premier E.O Leblanc of blessed memory, all of whom left us recently.

I must thank also Dominicans, on whom the mantle of leadership has fallen, in whatever area of life, for the contribution they have made to the progress which we as a nation have seen since Independence.

The 27th anniversary of our Independence comes on the heels of an excellent review of our country's ongoing economic programme by the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund.

On 14th October of this year, the IMF completed the Fifth Review of Dominica's economic performance. This review found that the economy had achieved a remarkable turnaround since the low-point of 2001-02, and is set this year to record the second straight year of above-average growth. The IMF found that the recovery is a reflection of this Government's successful implementation of the economic programme, and the resulting restoration of confidence in the economy.

In my budget address earlier this year, I focused on the growth imperative that confronts us. I identified the initiatives your Government would implement to generate economic growth, to increase employment opportunities and to improve the quality of life of our people. Your Government is currently finalising its Growth and Social Protection Strategy (GSPS), which will provide the comprehensive development framework to direct our policies and programmes over the next five years. The draft document will be discussed at a final public consultation before its adoption by Cabinet.

The people of this country will agree that even as we pursued necessary economic measures, your Government continued to focus on the basic needs of the people. Throughout the crisis, your Government strengthened our social protection programme and bolstered poverty reduction. Your Government was determined to ensure that the most vulnerable groups in our society did not suffer adverse consequences from the economic measures that we were forced to adopt.

In May of this year, we asked the electorate to return us to office to complete the job we started. Dominicans showed once again their clear understanding of the issues which confront this Nation and chose that package of policies and programmes best suited to address them. The electorate placed their trust in this Government, and we were returned for a second term with an increased mandate to take this country forward with purpose and mission.

Like other anniversaries, the anniversary of Independence is a time for reflection. I too, have been reflecting on the fact that there are so many things that are good about our people and country. One of these characteristics is our resilience. Resilience in the face of the natural disasters to which our country is so prone and resilience in the face of difficult economic times. Those who are old enough to remember still speak of the positive manner of our response to the ravages of Hurricane David, the most devastating hurricane to hit our shores. Our people put their individual and collective efforts to the task of recovery and in quick time, with much help from beyond our shores, our country had recovered from this major natural disaster.

It can truly be said to the beloved people of our country that we could not have done it without you! It was this collective willingness on the part of our people to make the necessary adjustments that so impressed the international and regional communities, and was in large measure responsible for their manifest support to our country during its hour of greatest need. The warmth, the kindness, the friendliness, the smiles of our people are legendary qualities that are not lost on visitors to our shores.

The close proximity of Independence to our World Creole Music Festival provides such a great opportunity to showcase our culture as well as our pride in country, in our culture, and in ourselves. Our cuisine, our attire, our music all shine through during this period. Truly our people must be culturally the strongest in the Caribbean – a considerable tribute to our sense of pride and cultural preservation. May this quality be sustained forever! May our cultural heritage continue to be cared for! And may it translate to other positive aspects of our lives.

I must mention in this regard the positive response to Government's call to the Nation to include in this year's commemoration of our Independence, a National Clean-up and Beautification Campaign. As the Hon Minister for Education stated so very well: "It takes more than bricks and mortar to build a Nation."

Our clean-up campaign is a reminder to us all of our justifiable claim to be the Nature Island of the World, and of the imperative of constantly reflecting this boast in the pursuit of our daily and in every aspect of our behaviour. I am gratified by the very constructive response that has already been manifested across the villages in our country, some of which are already well advanced in the effort.

This is an excellent opportunity not only to keep our country clean and green, but also to again call your attention to the need to pay regard to the call of the Almighty God for us to be good stewards of the resources he gave us in this the 'Land of the Lord'. I was happy to learn that in doing this we are in sync with the Pastoral Letter of the Antilles Episcopal Conference on 'Caring for the Earth – Our Responsibility'.

Truly, there are so many good things about our people, and our country. It is useful now and again to pause and take note. We will need these qualities as we continue to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. For challenges there are indeed. The transcending challenge that we face as we commemorate this 27th anniversary of our Independence, is to sustain levels of economic growth that will make for employment generation and poverty reduction.

As I articulated in my Budget Address this year, Government will give greater impetus to the growth process in our country, having successfully placed our public finances on a sustainable path that will not threaten our efforts at increasing economic growth. We will do this in a manner consistent with:

"A vision for our country as a place characterised by a people empowered to contribute to their own well-being and that of our country, through policies of Government geared to facilitating an environment within which private enterprise can flourish to the benefit of our people."

As I also indicated in my Budget Address:

"Government is fully committed to pursuing this vision for our country, as indeed we are committed to pursuing over the next five years, the goals and pledges set out in the Labour Party's Manifesto."

We are proud of the growth performance achieved in 2004 -- 3.6% as against 1% during the previous year. But we have a long road to travel. Our continuing mission is to give full effect to the articulated vision – to do all those things that are necessary to make things happen; and to do these things well.

We are pursuing initiatives aimed at improving the climate for business so as to attract the private investment that is essential for achieving our growth targets. We have to do what it takes to attract investment. We have to make it easier to do business in Dominica; we have to reduce the unnecessary red tape that clogs the process of starting a business.

We intend to make public sector institutions more business friendly, and more efficient. We have to amend relevant legislation to make the legal process more business friendly. We must work on our investment attraction strategies and mechanisms. We need a business community

that is more proactive in identifying investment opportunities and forging strategic partnerships with foreign investors.

I repeat my pledge to the private sector to be open to business persons with ideas, suggestions and proposals for increasing the flow of private investment, and to partnering with them to make things happen. Dominica's situation is like any other country – the best efforts of Government will not be enough without the efforts of the private sector.

Your Government has begun placing special emphasis on improving the climate for doing business in our country. In this regard, there are various reforms that have already taken place, including improvements at the Customs Department and the Registry.

This work will be accelerated both through the continuing programme of public sector reform, and through the recently signed agreement with the USAID for the commencement of a Caribbean Trade Support Project. This project will focus on implementation of recommended initiatives and reforms to improve the climate for business and for investment in our country. I wish to thank the Government of the United States in this regard.

It will seek to expand business opportunities as well as remove the constraints of doing business in our country. This project is an important plank of Government's twin-pillar strategy of both generating economic growth and reducing the incidence of poverty in our country by increasing employment opportunities.

In this context, the population is well aware that a major item on the structural reform agenda is the improvement to the tax system, the first phase being the introduction of the VAT. The Ministry of Finance is ensuring that all persons including the members of the private sector and the consumer are fully apprised of the VAT and how it works. We want again to implore the cooperation of all to ensure that the transition to the VAT is a smooth one. We expect that there will be challenges but it is my view that with the cooperation of all, we can make a success of it.

I take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the VAT Implementation Team for the tremendous amount of work that they have been doing over the past months – over 3000 information brochures have been distributed to consumers; over 500 presentations have been made to prospective VAT registrants; and these presentations have been made in communities all over our island, at the VAT booths on the streets, as well as the boardrooms of businesses.

This massive education effort has been equal to the magnitude of the reform that the VAT will reflect when it takes effect on 1st March of next year. Your continued cooperation in this effort will ensure a smooth transition – after all, the VAT is not merely another tax reform measure; it

is an element in the platform for growth that this Government has been putting in place over the past few years.

To compliment these developments, we have sent a clear message to the private sector with the appointment of a businessman as the Minister for Tourism, Industry and Private Sector Relations.

One of the mechanisms for growth is the \$14 million Eco-Tourism Development Programme (ETDP). Through this programme Government has been able to implement successfully a number of key projects and has supported several initiatives in the tourism sector. This programme, funded by the European Union and the Government of Dominica, is meant to provide support to Government for the implementation of specific initiatives for institutional strengthening, human resource development, destination marketing, eco-tourism product development and community tourism. To date much has been achieved under the ETDP, and much more is expected before the completion of the programme in December 2006.

During the course of this year, the programme was able to provide much needed support and resources to enable the country to market itself more successfully and promote Dominica as a major tourist destination. As a result, Dominica has had a more regular presence at major US and European Trade Shows, particularly those focusing on the niche markets like dive and soft adventure tourism.

In addition to the work of the ETDP, the Ministry has seen successes in several other key areas. A number of tourism sites have been upgraded or are being targeted for upgrades. These include the Fresh Water Lake Access Road, the Sulphur Spring Access Road, Middleham Falls Facility, Syndicate/Morne Diablotin Reception Facility and the Carib Model Village, among others. In order to ensure that the communities themselves benefit from these sites, Government is making available space and funding for those groups that are ready to take on the management of these sites and use them to generate income for residents of the respective communities.

The programme recently completed a study for the "Roseau Development Programme" and identified a number of short and long-term priority projects. For example, a sum of EC\$800,000 has been set aside for the expansion of the Roseau Ferry Terminal. Funds have also been secured for a vendor's mall in Roseau and for the enhancement of the Botanic Gardens.

The Community Tourism Component of the programme has supported several community initiatives, among them being the refurbishment of the Art & Craft Centre at the Geneva Heritage Park. This year, several projects have already been approved to receive funding to support community tourism enterprises, among them being projects in Grand Fond, Vieille Case, Soufriere/Scotts Head, Portsmouth and Giraudel/Eggleston. It is expected that by the

first quarter of 2006, well over 15 community based tourism enterprises will receive funding support for various types of tourism projects throughout Dominica.

Additionally, I take pleasure in informing the Nation of the following developments:

1. Caribbean Sun Airlines will commence service to Dominica from December 15th 2005 with a daily and direct flight between San Juan and Melville Hall;
2. Discussions are underway to alleviate the financial difficulties of the Hotel Sector through debt restructuring; and
3. Efforts to attract a major up-market hotel operator to the island have commenced.

Clearly, there are several opportunities for enterprising Dominicans to get involved in this growth industry, and Government for its part is giving added substance to its conviction that tourism is one of the growth pillars of this economy.

In this regard, Government has been taking steps to deal with the problem of crime in our country, as it affects the lives and livelihoods of our people, including its adverse consequences for the tourism industry. I take this opportunity to announce that during the current fiscal year, Government will be making available to the Commonwealth of Dominica Police Force, eight additional vehicles to assist in their efforts to stem the scourge of crime in our midst and contribute to the security of our Nation.

In addition within the shortest possible time- frame we will seek to increase the number of Police Officers, provide increased opportunities for training, and make funding available for the rehabilitation of police stations across the country.

Another pillar of our economy continues to be agriculture. Our banana industry, now more than ever, is under severe threat from developments in the international community. A recent ruling by the World Trade Organisation threatens to further erode the preferential access to Europe that our bananas have traditionally enjoyed. If this recent ruling stands, a ruling that we consider to be unfair to the interests of our countries, the consequences for the banana industry and indeed for our entire economy could be very dire indeed.

This is, of course, a consequence very much to be avoided. Your Government will continue to work with renewed vigour with the Windward Islands and other African, Caribbean and Pacific banana producing countries, to find a solution to this problem and to avert the looming disaster that it portends. We shall therefore engage the EU, the Latin American Producers, the United States of America and other interested parties in a further effort at defending the vital banana industry.

The ruling has the potential to negate the intended benefits from various planned activities to increase banana production. These include the Banana Development Programme to be executed by the Dominica Banana Producers Ltd., as well as the irrigation and drainage projects in Castle Bruce and Melville Hall.

All of these are conditions that characterize the process of development in countries such as ours, and gives added meaning to my statement in the Budget Address that “development in islands like Dominica is neither easy nor straightforward”, and that “the process is in the nature of a roller-coaster ride”. Once again, it appears, the resilience of our people may be further tested. But we continue to hope and to work assiduously towards a favourable resolution of this vital issue.

We will of course be pursuing efforts to revitalize the non-banana sector. For example, earlier this year Government signed a Technical Cooperation Agreement with the Chinese Government. A focus of that Agreement will be on the development of aquaculture, in particular prawn farming. An aquaculture specialist is scheduled to arrive on the island later this month for an extended assignment. The Chinese Technical Mission is also expected to assist Dominica in the production of vegetables, flowers and fruits.

External funding has been secured for a number of initiatives in the agriculture sector, including emergency support for farmers and fishermen affected by the heavy rains and earthquake of last year; further support to our food security programme; and added funding for agricultural extension. In the coming year several new projects will be undertaken, including implementation of the Young Farmer Programme.

A Strategic Policy and Management Framework for Agricultural Development in Dominica is currently being developed with the assistance of IICA and the FAO. Government’s plans for the energy sector will provide strong support to initiatives in tourism and agriculture.

Government has already announced plans for the profitable exploitation of our country’s geothermal resources. These plans, we will continue to pursue actively, and we will continue to support initiatives in renewable energy. The cost of energy is an important aspect of the enabling environment for business, and our plans in this area are intended to redound to the benefit of both the business community and households around the island.

We will encourage entrepreneurs to seek to make maximum use of the many natural assets of wind, solar, water, and geothermal resources that this country is blessed with.

In the meantime, through the previously announced PetroCaribe initiative of the Government of Venezuela, we will be hoping to make an impact on the price of electricity within a period of three months. Under this initiative, Government just yesterday received a 5000 barrel storage

tank, as a precursor to receiving the first shipment of diesel within a period of six weeks. Your Government has been moving with speed to take advantage of this initiative's potential for price reduction. I know that this is a development that all our people look forward to.

In this context, I must appeal to our electricity provider, DOMLEC, to have regard to the need to increase the efficiency of their operations and to strive for the highest levels of cost-effectiveness. In these times of very high oil prices, it is even more imperative that our electricity provider exercises its corporate mind towards cushioning the increasing burden on the consumer and on the business sector alike. Towards this end, Government will continue to engage DOMLEC with a view to examining every possible avenue for bringing urgently needed relief in full awareness of the international situation.

Developments in the telecommunications sector will also have the effect of reducing the cost of doing business in Dominica, as well as empowering community facilities through broadband connectivity. The regional World Bank-funded Telecoms and ICT Development Project was launched recently in Dominica, with the objective of improving access, quality and use of telecommunications services to achieve socio-economic development in the OECS. All indications are that significant benefits will continue to accrue to Dominica from this sector.

The improvement of our country's physical infrastructure is essential to support the efforts in tourism, agriculture, telecommunications and other growth areas of our country.

Your Government is actively pursuing the implementation of its public investment programme. This programme includes the Airport Enhancement Project, in respect of which the first phase is nearing completion and the second phase, that is the extension of the runway and lighting, will commence shortly.

Only yesterday, a contingent of army personnel from Venezuela arrived on the island to commence work on the runway extension. This will encompass the diversion of the river at the landward end of the runway and the leveling of the high ground along the northern parameter of the runway. I wish to thank publicly, the Government and people of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela for their most generous assistance to the Government and people of Dominica.

Regarding the reconstruction of the Roseau to Melville Hall Road, the project dossier has been completed and submitted to the French Development Agency and we are awaiting a response for the engagement of a consultant to undertake the final road designs.

The Road Improvement and Management Project, involving improvements to the Roseau Valley Roads will also commence in this fiscal year. Tenders have been invited for consultants to supervise the project which is being funded by the Caribbean Development Bank. Designs for

the Roseau Road Reinstatement Project have also been completed, however due to the cost escalation, a proposal for additional funding was submitted to the Kuwaiti Fund for approval.

Of the utmost importance is the proposed redevelopment of the West Coast Road, on which designs have already commenced, and construction is scheduled to begin once the Windsor Park Sports Stadium is completed. This project will include a by-pass at Massacre and Mahaut. The scope of this project will improve coastal sea defenses where necessary. Overall this project which is a major component of the four pillar project being funded by the People's Republic of China, is expected to significantly contribute to economic activity on our island.

Finally, Government is mindful of the needs of communities all around our country for improved road infrastructure. Government is making available an additional \$3 million for the improvement of village roads.

It is now common knowledge that construction of the over \$34 million dollar Windsor Park Sports Stadium is well underway, with work progressing satisfactorily. By this time next year, our dream for a State-of-the-Art international cricket and football stadium will have been realized. Today is an opportunity once again to express our appreciation to the Government of the People's Republic of China.

The Housing Sector also forms an important element of Government's growth thrust.

I am pleased to report that progress is being made in finalizing the financing arrangements for the housing projects that I announced in this year's Budget Address. These initiatives involve joint public and private sector partnerships. For lower-income earners however, Government has been working to address their needs through the Shelter Development Project.

This project includes the provision of financial resources for housing credit, training for financial institutions in micro-credit methodologies, training in efficient housing designs, and training in retrofitting techniques for the Housing Division and project beneficiaries. This project will continue to provide affordable mortgage financing to low-income households and enhance Government's ability to make a sustained impact on improving the physical and social conditions of human settlements.

There are other initiatives, including Squatter Regularization and the construction of affordable housing in the Carib Territory to improve the quantity and quality of our country's housing stock. Government is taking its squatter regularization promise very seriously indeed, and in this context has decided to make land available to eligible squatters in designated areas, at no more than \$1.00 per square foot. The eligibility criteria are being drawn up by the Ministry responsible for Housing and will be available very shortly. Through this approach it is hoped to

come close to regularize the situations of, and thereby to assist the empowerment of hundreds of squatters in our fair land.

Over the next year new and innovative partnerships will be explored with existing financial institutions and mortgage finance entities, including Credit Unions, to provide affordable mortgage finance to middle and low income earners, for the construction of one, two and three bedroom expandable housing units, thereby decreasing the overall existing housing shortfall.

The Private Sector has been invited on numerous occasions to present proposals to the Government for joint venture initiatives in the area of housing development. This call is once again being made.

I spoke earlier of empowering our people as an element of the vision that your Government has for this country. This empowerment will derive from the efforts at generating economic growth and the attendant benefits to the population through increased opportunities for employment, including self-employment, and for improvement in well-being. Empowerment will also derive from the various policies and programmes that Government has been pursuing in the area of social development.

Critical to this people empowerment programme is the Social Investment Fund which should have come on stream more than a year ago. Unfortunately the establishment of this long-awaited Fund, which is designed to have a large impact on poverty reduction and community empowerment, has been another casualty to the slow pace of work and the bureaucratic complexities of the European Union's administrative arrangements.

While still a very good friend, the European Union has too often appeared to operate with maximum administrative delay in the disbursement of funds committed for development and project purposes, even when the recipient countries have worked very hard to satisfy the requisite formats and criteria for preparing project submissions. Yet another example of this is the recent decision to suspend disbursement of resources promised under the Framework of Mutual Obligations, for which many months had been spent in preparing the necessary documentation.

This unexpected decision arising out of concerns by the EU regarding undertakings in a far off ACP country is adversely affecting a number of measures and programmes in support of the ongoing programme of economic adjustment and growth. Thankfully, the rest of the international community, in particular the World Bank and the IMF, have rallied to Dominica's cause in making representations to the EU from the highest levels of these institutions, though these efforts are yet to realise the desired results. Here again, Dominica is committed to working with the other affected countries to seek to resolve this matter, as in many ways Dominica stands to be far more adversely affected than the other islands.

Our efforts at people empowerment continue apace in other areas – through our efforts to improve the provision of health services to the population; through our efforts at education, and human resource development; and through our continuing programmes of social protection and poverty reduction.

The Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica believes in a health system that cares for the people it serves, provides care regardless of one's ability to pay, supports and values our health care providers, offers timely quality treatment and promotes health and well-being.

The Strategic Plan for Health for 2002-2006 establishes the platform for Government action on health. It identifies several priority areas aimed at ensuring that health services are directed to those areas that will guarantee the highest benefits for all our citizens, with special interest in tackling inequalities in health. These areas include environmental health, child health, mental health, HIV/AIDS, primary health care, solid waste management and health infrastructure.

It is certainly worthy of note that over the past few months over 3000 persons have been screened and some 550 flown to Cuba for treatment of eye diseases. You would want me to express our collective gratitude to the Cuban Government and medical practitioners for this immense gesture. The Programme dubbed: 'Miracle Mission' has improved the sight of some Dominicans and in some cases allowed the blind the see.

The Princess Margaret Hospital will soon be upgraded through financial support from the People's Republic of China. Work on the Acute Psychiatric Unit at the Hospital will commence very shortly. We will be launching a massive upgrade of health centres across the country with a view to further lifting standards of health care in the rural areas. Diagnostic centres will be established in Grand Bay, Marigot, Portsmouth and Castle Bruce.

Your Government has launched an initiative towards developing an alternative approach to health care financing that will ensure the more equitable distribution of the burden of payment for health care services. To this end, a National Consultation on Health Care Financing was convened recently.

Cabinet recently considered a report of a Task Force set up to examine issues germane to the recruitment, retention, recognition and reward of nursing professionals. The recommendations of the Task Force which address matters of salary structure, training, a reward system and sessional work among others, are being actively considered by the Ministry of Health with a view to implementation in the short-to-medium term. Some of these recommendations are already being implemented.

The recommendation regarding the 'sessions programme' will be implemented as early as next week. Sixty pre-nursing students are undergoing training at the State College and thirty-one

(31) nurses are pursuing training. I wish to pay tribute to the continuing contribution of overseas Dominicans towards the improvement of our country's health services. May I take this opportunity also to express the country's appreciation to our nurses for their dedication to duty in the face of continuing challenges.

Government is especially proud of its achievements in education and human resource development, as a means of empowering our people to contribute to their own well-being and that of our Nation. We accept that education, training and human resource development are critical for the economic and social transformation of Dominica.

Your Government is committed to ensuring that our people are given the opportunity and the tools necessary to contribute meaningfully to the development of this country. Universal Secondary Education (USE) was achieved in September of this year, when all students who wrote the 2005 Common Entrance Examination gained access to a secondary school. Our next goal is Universal Tertiary Education by 2015, a goal that we will pursue as assiduously as we did with Universal Secondary Education.

There is also another goal that Government has set itself to achieve by 2015 – that is the goal of having at least one university graduate in every household in our country. And we will also work diligently to achieve this. This Government is serious about educating, developing and empowering our people, particularly our young persons.

The achievement of universal secondary education has necessitated expansion in tertiary education. The Dominica State College continues to provide opportunities for all young people to further their education and develop skills to enhance their competitive advantage in the labour market. The expansion in continuing education at the College will provide even more opportunities for persons already employed to sharpen, improve or diversify their skills and increase productivity in this country.

Government's commitment to developing our country's human resources has led us to seek and obtain scholarships for our young persons in a number of countries with which we have diplomatic relations. To this end your Government has secured overseas scholarships for one hundred and nine Dominicans to pursue studies during this academic year in the following countries: Venezuela, 35; Mexico, 24; Cuba, 25; China, 5; and the USA, 20. These numbers included some 20 young persons from the Carib Territory. These numbers do not include traditional scholarships such those awarded by the British, the French, the Canadians and the OAS. I am pleased to announce that an additional 150 young persons will be granted scholarships during 2006 for purposes of pursuing university education.

In all this the needs in relation to early childhood education will not be forgotten, and indeed Government will be giving greater attention to this area as well. We are working on setting

standards for providers of early childhood education, with a view to licensing those who satisfy the agreed criteria. It is Government's policy in this area to ensure that all children from birth to five years of age receive the best quality care.

In the area of sports, Government will continue to assist with the provision of facilities and opportunities. The benefits of sports to individuals and society are many and the list of Dominicans whose lives have been positively impacted by sports is long. News of the progress being made by Liam Sebastien and Mervin Matthew in Regional Cricket and the securing of a one-year contract by Ottis George to play in the NBA for the New York Knicks further strengthen our resolve to pursue our sports development efforts.

In youth development, your Government continues to work through its Youth Division towards development and empowerment of our young men and women. The Youth Division would want me to highlight the fact that young Dominicans trained by the Division were called upon to contribute to Grenada's reconstruction efforts after Hurricane Ivan.

In addition, five young men trained under the Skills Training Programme successfully participated in the Commonwealth Youth Volunteer Corps 2005 in Grenada. During the six-week programme they were involved in reconstruction of dwelling houses for needy families. Reports indicate that Dominica was the best prepared, most hardworking and disciplined team, and were the recipients of Commonwealth Youth Awards for their efforts.

I am pleased to announce a further reinvigoration of the Youth Employment and Empowerment Programme, through Government's decision to inject an added \$500,000.00 into the programme, as we did last year when 150 young persons benefited from this facility.

These young persons took advantage of the funding that has been available under this facility, for start-up grants to be used to set up businesses of various kinds.

The establishment of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy is at our doorstep. It is therefore necessary to take note that the twin planks of our strategic vision – economic growth and people empowerment- will only be fully attained if we respond positively to the challenges of globalisation.

I said in my Budget Address that globalisation is a tide that we cannot stem; and that Dominica is irrevocably committed to the concept and reality of Caribbean integration. I said also that "very small states like Dominica have a very difficult time competing in an increasingly global economic environment". Indeed what I said earlier about our banana industry and the World Trade Organisation bears out this point.

The CSME is an important element in the array of defenses against the potential ravages of globalisation. We should view it as an opportunity. It is an opportunity to expand our boundaries, to expand our markets, to expand our economic space. It however remains an opportunity that we must prepare ourselves to take advantage of.

Our efforts in education and human resource development are important elements in ensuring the increased competitiveness of our people and our country as we approach the CSME and the globalised world. All our development efforts must be sharpened by full awareness of the imperative of becoming more competitive and placing ourselves in a position to take advantage of the expanding opportunities.

This includes our attitudes to work, our work ethic; and our willingness to be more productive and to be able to compete in every sphere of endeavour. Your Government pledges to continue to play its part in this, and will do so with greater vigour. But again as I stated in my Budget Address, “ The CSME will impact the lives and livelihoods of almost every segment of our society ...”, and we all have a responsibility to respond and respond well.

The anniversary of our Independence is a good time to take stock of our achievements and to check that we are still on the right path. So far I have given a full account of our stewardship of the nation’s resources and delivery on the promises made. All the indicators suggest that we have moved forward relentlessly towards our goals. We have achieved economic growth and enhanced social protection. For this we are grateful to many people and countless organisations. I wish to thank our OECS and CARICOM fellow members for being good neighbours and for coming to our aid in our time of need.

I thank the International Development Agencies who have stood by our side as we traversed the difficult path of adjustment. I thank the donor community for remaining faithful to Dominica. I wish to express special thanks to all our friends in the international community. In particular I wish to thank the European Union and member states for their consistent support. I wish to thank the People’s Republic of China in a special way for the response it has shown to our need for the development of major capital projects.

I also wish to thank the Government and people of the Republic of Cuba and the Government and People of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela for their hand of friendship and tangible assistance. I must also say thanks to all Dominicans in the Diaspora for your continued interest in Dominica’s development and the practical contributions you have made particularly to the Princess Margaret Hospital and other worthy causes.

My Fellow Dominicans, even as we must express our gratitude to our friends overseas, I must remind all of us that at the end of the day, it is we Dominicans who have the responsibility to

develop our country. It is a responsibility we must embrace. In any event, support from outside will not be forthcoming in the absence of a clear commitment from us who are inside.

I want to thank all of you for the confidence you have shown in the Dominica Labour Party and in me as your chief servant. We deeply appreciate the new mandate that you have just given us to move this country forward with purpose and mission. I give you my personal pledge to proceed along the chosen path unswervingly. I now want to invite all Dominicans of all political persuasions, to bury their differences and to join us on the journey towards our national goals. In particular I want to make a special appeal to the Private Sector and to Civil Society to seize the time and play their assigned respective roles in the economic and social development of our beloved country.

I wish to end with the words of former President of Dominica, Sir Clarence Seignoret, echoed last year by President Dr Nicholas Liverpool:

“I believe we in Dominica are experiencing the dawn of a realisation that instead of divisions and dissensions we need unity; instead of vituperation, we need cooperation; and in place of old frustrations and despair, we need the dynamism of constructive thinking and cooperative endeavour. Above all, we need at least a truce in which to build the blueprints of a new dynamic society.”

There is much that we can now put behind us. The worst of times is behind us; the elections are behind us; the election challenges are behind us. It is an imperative of the time that we unite and move forward together with purpose and mission. With God’s help, we will achieve.

LET US MAKE INDEPENDENCE MORE THAN A DATE IN HISTORY.

LET US MAKE IT A WATERSHED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR PEOPLE AND OUR CIVILIZATION.

My heartiest congratulations to all those persons who will receive national awards at today’s function, in particular Mr. Kenneth Samuel, my former primary school teacher, Ms. Warrington, the mother Theresa of Dominica and the Hon. Urban Baron, my friend, my brother, my colleague parliamentarian, a man who has given and continues to give himself to his people and country selflessly.

HAPPY INDEPENDENCE TO ALL !

REMEMBER ALWAYS THAT GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME AND ALL THE TIME GOD IS GOOD. MAY GOD CONTINUE TO BLESS ALL OF US AND OUR BEAUTIFUL ISLAND OF DOMINICA.